

Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Latrobe, February 28, 1804, from Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital. Edited by Saul K. Padover.

Jefferson to Latrobe

Washington, February 28, 1804.

Dear Sir

I am sorry the explanations attempted between Dr. Thornton and yourself, on the manner of finishing the chamber of the House of Representatives, have not succeeded. At the original establishment of this place advertisements were published many months offering premiums for the best plans for a Capitol and a President's house. Many were sent in. A council was held by General Washington with the Board of Commissioners, and after very mature examination two were preferred, and the premiums given to their authors, Doctor Thornton and Hobens, and the plans were decided on. Hobens' has been executed. On Doctor Thornton's plan of the Capitol the north wing has been extended, and the south raised one story. In order to get along with any public undertaking it is necessary that some stability of plan be observed — nothing impedes progress so much as perpetual changes of design. I yield to this principle in the present case more willingly because the plan begun for the Representative room will, in my opinion, be more handsome and commodious than anything which can now be proposed on the same area. And though the spheroidical dome presents difficulties to the executor, yet they are not beyond his art; and it is to overcome difficulties that we employ men of genius. While, however, I express my opinion that we had better go through with this wing of the Capitol on the plan which has been settled, I would not be understood to suppose there does exist sufficient authority to control the original plan in any of its parts, and to accommodate it to changes

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of circumstances. I only mean that it is not advisable to change that of this wing in its present stage. Though I have spoken of a spheroidal roof, that will not be correct by the figure. Every rib will be a portion of a circle of which the radius will be determined by the span and rise of each rib. Would it not be best to make the internal columns of well-burnt brick, moulded in

portions of circles adapted to the diminution of the columns? Burlington, in his notes on Palladio, tells us that he found most of the buildings erected under Palladio's direction, and described in his architecture, to have their columns made of brick in this way and covered over with stucco. I know an instance of a range of six or eight columns in Virginia, twenty feet high, well proportioned and properly diminished, executed by a common bricklayer. The bases and capitals would of course be of hewn stone. I suggest this for your consideration, and tender you my friendly salutations.

[Th: Jefferson.]

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